
A LETTER WRITTEN IN 1931 BY K. SCHILDER ABOUT LIFE AFTER DEATH

Questions raised by everyday-encounters in matters of faith have once again taken on renewed urgency. This, in itself, is nothing new, and so it is that many young people are wrestling today with questions that occupied the minds of previous generations as well. I had to think about this issue when I came upon a letter, dated 1931, in which the late Dr. K. Schilder answered a searching question of his cousin (26 years old), who just recently had lost her father.

During the routine business of sorting out and reading correspondence by and for K. Schilder, I sent out an appeal to forward to me any letters written by him, so that they could be added to the archives I am taking care of. (*) Thus it happened that I came in the possession of, amongst other contributions, the following letter, forwarded to me by Mrs. B. Folmer-Langelier at Spijkenisse [Holland].

It goes without saying that it is neither possible nor desirable to publicize all kinds of letters that thus came my way, but it was this specific letter that caught my attention, because of its pastoral slant. In addition, it is also a personal letter which affords us a closer insight in Schilder's own course of life.

Since she is here addressed as 'Bep' (an abbreviation for her full name of Egbertha Grietje Leijdekker, 1904-1981), and since Schilder writes about his departed uncle, her father must be a brother of K. Schilder's mother, whose name was Grietje Leijdekker. Here, then, follows the letter.

*Erlangen (**)
March 15, 1931*

Dear Bep,

I really appreciated it that you so spontaneously wrote me one and another about my uncle's last days. Yesterday I received a letter from my aunt as well, who also wrote to me about a few specific details. That is why I was so taken with them because I loved my uncle dearly. He always made such a good and positive impression on my young life; moreover, I always admired him because of his integrity when dealing with all sorts of people. The most telling expression of this I found in his relationship to Rotterdam's minister Dr. Kuyper.¹ From the

very onset, my Uncle held different views in certain respects and had different sympathies (in a general sense) from those associated with Kuyper's name. But once he got to know Dr. Kuyper as an upright man, uncle's views regarding a number of church and theological issues never prompted him to deny or ignore Dr. Kuyper's good qualities. Here you can discern the honest Christian (in particular after one has gained some experience in church life and ensuing public strife), a man who says precisely what he considers to be the truth but never attacks the person or persons who think differently (or seem to), nor withholds the praise and honour that is due to them. The brief article which the very same Dr. Kuyper wrote (presumably uninformed about certain contentious matters) in the Rotterdam Church News (which I receive weekly) had my unreserved approval and I was struck by its integrity and valid assessment.

It is a privilege, Bep, to have had that kind of father. As for myself, I have barely known my own father. Your father, however, in as far as I happened to come within his radius of influence during my youth, discharged on me the duties of a father by pointing me to Christ, while we were walking together, and by showing to me something of the attraction of the struggle for Church and faith.

Once you are home again, please convey my thanks to my aunt for the letter I received from her.

It will be my pleasure trying to answer your question, albeit in a summary fashion. If I remember correctly, you were present when I dealt with Lord's Day 22 for the first time in the Church on the Tideman Straat. The same questions are raised in this Lord's Day as well. Speaking at functions of several societies and once on a radio broadcast, I addressed the topic: Between Death and Final Judgment. In retrospect, now I regret it I did because otherwise I would have chosen this topic for my next radio speech. On account of time limitations I had to decline a few requests to deliver another message, but expect to do it some other day. In that event I would have preferred to embark on this topic, had I not already done so.

I expect that your entire difficulty will vanish when you begin to make a clear distinction between

'longing' and 'groaning.' Certainly, the soul longs for the body. The vision of the fifth seal (souls under the altar) and in particular the message of Paul in 2 Cor. 5 is clearly to the point here. In 2 Cor. 5:1-10 Paul develops the idea that a soul without the body can be compared to a human being without clothing or without a dwelling. He longs for his clothing, his 'dwelling'. This earthly body is but a 'tent'; that is to say, a temporary shelter which can be easily dismantled (just think of a tent in the Middle East). It is not as sturdy as a building made of bricks, nor can it withstand a powerful gust of wind. At any rate, it constitutes some kind of house or clothing. And according to God's order of *creation* this body belongs together with the soul. As you know, He attuned the body and soul to each other, and that is why the ultimate end of God's 'longing' or *our own* 'longing' can never be some body-less existence for man. *As long as the body is not joined with the soul, the work of God (including His work of salvation) has as yet not reached full completion.*

True, it has in principle (Golgotha and Easter) in that salvation has been *secured* and the souls are immediately taken up to Christ, our Head. (***) But this *preliminary* gift of salvation must still be brought to its *glorious completion* on the Last Day, when God's work of salvation in Christ will culminate in its final act: the resurrection of the body and the reunification of the body with the soul. This is why the souls are *longing* for that final day (also for the sake of their bodies, though not in the first place because of this). But it will be in the first place because God's work will then have arrived at its final conclusion, because God's Name will no longer be blasphemed on this earth, and because the entire Church will then be delivered (not just a portion).

The question is now whether this longing can cause suffering or pain [groaning]. Not at all. Is it not so that *God longs as well, and so do the angels*? Yet, this cannot be interpreted as suffering for God and the angels; it is in effect their stretching forward to what lies ahead. And so it is for the blessed ones that are with God. Their longing is not a *painful longing*, since it must be distinguished from any longing here



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below which will never be free from sin or impatience or egocentricity.

You wrote: 'How can a soul in heaven yearn for something that lies ahead, whereas everything there is focused on God?' You may call to mind what I wrote a moment ago, namely that *God Himself, too, longs for the completion of His own work on the Last Day*. And so your problem will disappear forthwith, inasmuch as a soul which longs for the body *longs for the same thing as God does*. In other words: it is exactly *herein* that it is united with God. Indeed, the meaning of genuine love consists of desiring the same thing as does the object of our love. Permit me to put it to you bluntly: If your Father did *not* long

for the final day, he would for that very reason not be one with God. For heaven itself 'groans' for that day because the Last Day will be the Sabbath of God.

Neither forget, Bep, that there are two kinds of longing. There is a selfish kind of longing (whereby everything revolves around *ourselves*), which disposition ignores God or the communion of saints, God's work. There is also another kind of longing, a *theocentric* one. This means that God is pre-eminent, next God's work (e.g. the congregation, the deliverance of nature and creation, and only then (in relation with all of these) finally: *we ourselves*). That is why our earthly longing is so often sinful, for sometimes we seek our own interests and do not think about God's glory, nor the deliverance of His Church. But in heaven sin is non-existent. And so it is that the primary longing of the souls will be for the glory of God. Inasmuch as the complete fruition of God's work belongs to the realm of His glorification, this will help explain the souls' longing for their own bodies. We might therefore put it this way: Your father longs for his body not because this is so important to himself but because therein, and by means thereof, he will be enabled (as a suitable instrument) to glorify God. Yet he does not long for his own glory, independent from the glory of God or that of the Church. And thus he joins in the choir of the blessed ones calling for the final preparation of the Church, for the addition of the last elect, for the exaltation of God's Name far above and beyond any kind of sin and human blasphemy.

This kind of longing (void of any trace of self-centeredness) is not associated with suffering, since it means *obedience* to God and *unification* with Him. This longing is therefore never disassociated from the profound longing for God's will to be done and His times to be fulfilled when He ordains it. In addition to all of this, you ought to realize that there is no longer any sense of 'time' in that other world. This means, for instance, that your father does not entertain ideas such as: 'There are still that many years to go.' Having said all this, I believe that the question has not completely been solved (for us, mysteries will of course remain). Even so, it has been answered to such an extent that you will be able to grasp why this 'longing' is not painful.

It is good to ponder these things. For it follows from the above that our departed are longing for the conjoining of the church with Christ. In other words, to put it very concretely, your father longs as well to be united with his children and their enduring existence with God. Here lies a most profound mystery: transcending both flesh and blood there is a bond, a spiritual bond with God, so that the redeemed can no longer suffer any pain, even if they were to 'miss' yonder all those that once were near to them here below. On the other hand, the blessedness in God is linked with the elevated joy that 'ours according to the flesh' will also be 'His according to the Spirit.' So there is nothing we can do to draw the departed down toward *us*, whereas we can do all that needs to be done to let *ourselves together with them* be drawn unto God by means of the Spirit, who wishes to unite

them and us. The only way for us to rally round our deceased in a mutual relationship of Spirit and 'longing' is by our service to God. If we think this through, then a deathbed as you were allowed to observe from nearby can generate a power in our lives, a sanctifying power, a 'pull' upwards; first of all toward God, and next (also because of it) toward our departed who belong to Him, His 'living ones'.

It was my pleasure to set aside a Sunday afternoon for this letter. This topic is certainly worthy of our thoughts, and I can well imagine that this question and others like it are keeping your mind occupied. They often do this to me as well. When alone and thinking about her, I noticed on more than a single occasion that the image of my mother brought home a message to me.

Please give my aunt my best regards and be assured of my sincere sympathy.

*As always,
Your Klaas.*

NOTES OF THE TRANSLATOR:

* This article appeared in *De Reformatie* (Oct.30, 1993). The introduction was written by Dr. W.G. de Vries, son-in-law of the late Dr. K. Schilder.

** From 1930-1932 K. Schilder studied at the Friedrich Alexander University in Erlangen (Germany) where he obtained his Ph.D. (summa cum laude) on March 3, 1933.

*** Cf. *The Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 22.

1. Dr. A. Kuyper Jr. (1872-1941) son of Dr. Abraham Kuyper.